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The Gospel Among the Burmese

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Society
Methodist Episcopal Church
36 BROMFIELD ST. BOSTON, MASS.

PRICE, TWO CENTS

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❖ ❖ BY L U E L L A R I G B Y ❖ ❖

“The Burmese” as used here, means the races of people native to Burma, which includes not only the Burmese proper, but the hill tribes, the Karens, Chins, Kachins and Shans of Upper Burma, and still farther north the Musos, among whom is that latest marvel of present day missions — thousands seeking the Lord before their language has been reduced to writing, and the Bible translated into it.

The Baptist Church has done more than any other denomination for these hill tribes. Dr. Judson, their earliest missionary, did his great work with the Burmese proper, but the hill tribes were found to be more accessible, and the efforts of their later missionaries have been concentrated on work among them.

The Karens were especially interesting because they had prophets among them who thought that they once knew and enjoyed fellowship with the true and living God, but that through sin and neglect they had lost

their knowledge of how to worship him. They also told of a "White Book," given them by this Father God, which was lost just as their fellowship with the Father was lost. The most wonderful part of their teaching was that concerning the Deliverer, who was to be a white foreigner from the West, who would come with white wings and bring again the "White Book."

When the missionaries came to Rangoon, traders carried to the hills tidings of the white foreigners who came in white-winged boats from the West, and of the wonderful book from which they taught. Great excitement spread from village to village of the Karens. Meetings were held where the old traditions were compared with this marvellous news, until the conclusion was reached that this was the fulfillment of prophecy.

When the missionary really came to the Karens, enthusiasm knew no bounds. Having always thought of their Deliverer as an earthly king, they tried to crown some of the representatives of the King of Kings. Gradually they grew wiser, and although the love of some grew cold when they learned that it was a spiritual rather than a temporal kingdom, many remained steadfast Christians.

Their language was reduced to writing and the "White Book," as they always call the Bible, was translated into it. Now, after four score years, the influence of the

Book and its teachings can be seen among the Karens. From being a few scattered tribes at war with one another, and despised by the Burmese, without a written language or any of the tokens of civilization, this race is now unified by that strongest of ties, the love of Jesus Christ, and is respected by the Burmese and trusted by the English government. They have printing presses, books, newspapers, schools in every Christian village, high schools in the larger cities and a theological college in Rangoon. They have preachers for their own congregations and missionaries to send to other wild tribes.

The stories of their sacrifices to spread the gospel among their heathen brothers touch all hearts. At one time when the crops had failed one community sent in its usual offering, saying, "We can afford to live on rice and salt, but we cannot afford *not* to send the gospel to our brothers." The pupils of a Karen mission school, in 1906, sent a Christmas gift of \$13.98 to the sufferers on the Congo.

Some endured persecution, a few were even crucified by cruel Buddhists, who had read the account of the death of Christ, and wished to show their scorn of Christ and Christians, but they remained true to the "White Book" and its teachings, and others believed because of their faith. The ultimate conversion of the whole race is only a question of time, and probably a very brief time.

The work among the other hill tribes is newer than that among the Karens, and in some cases has met with less response, but there are many similarities. The first tract ever written by a Kachin has recently been printed and has aroused much interest, as, ten years ago, they had no written language, but were a warlike, head-hunting tribe. One whole village of about fifty people has given up strong drink, spirit worship and working on the Sabbath, and all the people have accepted Christ.

A Chin man who acts as a sort of class leader for the little group of Chin Christians, which is all that the Methodist Church can claim of the work among the hill tribes, once said to the writer: "My people have lost faith in their old religion (the worship of spirits), and are seeking a God to worship. Where they are in touch with Christians they accept Christ, but where they are in touch with Buddhists they accept Buddhism." What a call this is to the Christian Church, and what haste there is in the call lest these people become followers of Buddha, and hardened to Christianity.

There has been steady but slow growth among the Shans, who are Buddhists, but it is through them that the Musos have been reached. These Musos are a people closely related to the Karens, differing in language and customs, but having the same traditions of the white foreigner and "White Book." Very little was known of them until 1903,

when a few came to Rev. W. M. Young, a missionary to the Shans, and, through an interpreter, asked to be taught. After these returned to their people and spread the news, many others came. October 30, 1904, the first convert was baptized, and soon tours were made through their villages. Before a missionary could be set aside to learn their language and work among them, many hundreds had received Christian baptism. Splendid missionaries are now at work at the language and native assistants, both Karen and Burmese, are working among the villages, while the call for missionaries in the more distant places is never ceasing.

In contrast with these modern miracles of missions the work among the Burmese proper seems to progress but slowly. All are familiar with the story of the six years of patient labor which Dr. Judson gave before he saw one convert. Burma is the stronghold of Buddhism, a land over-run with yellow-robed priests, and thickly dotted with pagodas, and it has taken long years of faithful labor to make any impression upon these millions of Buddhists. In 1900 there were said to be less than four thousand Christians among them.

In the last ten years, however, conditions have been rapidly changing. A spirit of inquiry into western civilization and an eagerness to learn the English language has taken hold of the people, and has filled our mis-

sion schools to over-flowing. The education of girls is becoming popular — a long step in advance in a land where Buddhism teaches that a woman's spiritual level is below that of a dog. Boys and girls educated in Christian schools can never be hostile to Christianity, and many of them become Christians. In recent years the parents, though Buddhists themselves, are consenting to the requests of their children for Christian baptism. Bishop Thoburn considers this one of the most encouraging features of our mission work in India. Recently a young man who had attended a Baptist mission school and became a Christian, died, and his sister, the only other Christian in the Buddhist family, insisted on having one of our missionaries conduct a funeral service, though it was followed by the Buddhist service. Opportunities for Christian helpfulness occur frequently, as the Burmese are not so exclusive as the Hindus and Mohammedans in their religious customs.

These Christian boys and girls from the schools make men and women who are the most efficient helpers the missionary can have. It is through them that the gospel is to conquer Buddhism. Yet there are very few schools compared to the need for them, and in many villages Buddhists are urgently requesting Christians to open schools — requests which must be refused for lack of men and money.

Evangelistic missionaries are everywhere welcomed, and Bible portions are being bought and read by thousands of Buddhists. For twenty years, one man worshipped the eternal God as revealed to him in a copy of the Psalms left behind by a traveler. He cast away his idols and made the fifty-first Psalm his daily prayer. When a missionary came and gave him a New Testament, the story of salvation through Jesus Christ brought joy to his heart, and he said: "For twenty years I walked by starlight; now I see the sun."

The good seed is sown and the harvest is sure, but oh, how few the reapers! "Now is the accepted time" for Burma, and the Church must not delay if she would win her for Christ. Secretary Leonard visited Burma after the Jubilee in India, and when he saw the situation he said the force of mission workers ought to be doubled immediately. Here are ten and a half millions of people waiting for the gospel. About one hundred and fifty thousand have come to know and to love Jesus, but most of these are from the hill tribes. The millions of Burmese Buddhists remain to be reached. Pray for them, send to them, and if possible, come to them with the gospel.